



TOUGHEST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where do you want to be 5 years from now in your career?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

This is the interviewer trying to see how you are in making long range plans and if you have goals that mesh with the organization's goals. One way to answer this question is to look back on your accomplishments to date:

"I started out in my profession as a junior clerk while I completed my college studies during the evenings. Once I had my degree, I applied for a transfer to a more advanced position, citing my on-the-job training. This has been my pattern for my career with my past 2 employers. I learn quickly on the job and am willing to take classes and workshops to augment my experience. I have been able to assume greater responsibilities and add more value to the organization. I do not think in terms of titles...I think more in terms of "How can I solve this problem? Since this has been my career style to date, I do not imagine it to change. In five years, I feel I will have continued to learn, to grow into a position of more responsibility and will have made a significant contribution to the organization."

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Here's another option:

"I'm looking forward to a position of greater responsibility. I'm preparing for that position by volunteering for as many different and challenging work assignments as possible in my current position, taking advantage of training opportunities, and working on my degree in the evening. I've looked into the career opportunities in your organization and I'm confident that my work ethic and experience will enable me to contribute to the success of the organization."

Focus on goals that are appropriate for the company and the job that you're applying for. For example, if you're applying for a trainee position in the healthcare industry don't tell the interviewers that your career goal is to become an attorney specializing in consumer affairs.

Don't say, "Five years from now I want to be in your job." Or "Five years from now I see myself supervising you."

2. Why are you interested in working for our company?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

What made you apply in the first place? If it was due to some reason like "my friend suggested it" I would consider another a reason when asked. What positive images do you think of when considering what it would be like to work for this clothing company? Examples could include "a great reputation. Terrific merchandise. On-the-job training. So and so works here and never stops talking positively about the experiences."

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Your key is to focus on the positive. Don't get into the negatives of your current job – "I don't like my current job". Also, don't be wishy-washy – "I've heard good things". What "good things?" Focus on strong positives including:

"Your company is recognized as an industry leader"

"You have a reputation for emphasizing teamwork."

"Great management development program."

"Reputation for developing employees and promoting from within the company."

If you don't have a convincing reason to work for the company, then why should they hire you?

3. Why do you want to leave your current position?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

When asked why you want to leave, do not downgrade in any way your prior/current employer...leave the interviewer with the feeling that you have only been associated with winners! If appropriate, point out that you are not just 'looking around' but are sincerely interested in working for this particular company and that you are not a 'job-hopper' but are interested in a long-term career move. Use your research to put forth several points about the company that you're applying to that will make you a great match (for the company) and suit your particular skills and experiences. Emphasize the fact that this opportunity to work for them is 'just what you have been looking for' because....and then go into several ways you can add value to the organization.

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Questions regarding your current job provide the interviewers with an insight into how you'll view your new job. The essential duties of the new job should not be the one of the dislikes on the old job. For example, if the new job requires working in teams, then you'll only raise questions if the change in your current job that you seek is to work more by yourself. Also, the essential duties of the new job should be one of the more desirable qualities of the old job.

4. Tell us about yourself.

Matt & Nan DeLuca

This is a killer question that more often than not is raised by an unskilled interviewer who does not know what else to ask. When raised by a skillful interviewer though it may be a very effective question that will provide more information than any other single question (or even a series of them). The problem is that when the question is raised you don't know which your interviewer is.

Since you know you will get a version of this question, prepare a 1-minute 'infomercial' about yourself. Start off with words to the effect, "to be brief" or "Here is the short version" letting the interviewer know he/she is not going to get a 15 minute discourse on your life and times. Then, state concisely who you are professionally:

"Ever since I was a child, I have been fascinated with things mechanical and this fascination revealed a talent for mechanical engineering...."

"The first time I visited my aunt's office at Time magazine when I was a teenager, I knew that I wanted to be involved in the business. Taking various writing and journalism classes in high school and college reinforced that belief. I volunteered to work at a local newspaper while attending school and took a succession of more challenging positions after graduation...."

Try to highlight those elements of your professional experience that 'tailors' you to the organization and the position. Conclude with a strong closing statement of how all this led you specifically to this

interview. "With my prior experience and your current involvement in _____, I felt that we would be an ideal match." You might add at the end "Since your firm is highly regarded, I was very interested in learning more about the opportunities here." You can end it with, "Is there anything specific you would like me to elaborate on?" and then be silent. Do not feel compelled to rattle on, adding more detail than is needed. Listen carefully to the feedback to see if your answer was not sufficient, so that you might learn what specifically the interviewer would like you to add.

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Keep your answer focused on job-related facts. Typically, your most recent experience provides the strongest case for your qualifications – start with your most recent experience.

- ✓ Review your resume or application.
- ✓ There is no right or wrong answer regarding experience. Your experience is your experience for better or worse. How you relate your experience to the job that you're interviewing for may make the difference in getting hired.
- ✓ The most qualified person to do a job is someone who has already done the job. If you were to hire someone to fix the plumbing in your house, whom would you hire? Someone who has never fixed the plumbing or someone who has? As you answer the interview questions, cite your work and life experiences as examples to reinforce to the interviewers that you've already done what they're looking for, and you've done it successfully.
- ✓ Many candidates make the mistake of emphasizing the number of years they've been on the job without providing detail as to the quality of their experience. Without the detail as to the quality of your experience, all else being equal, a candidate with more years on the job will be more qualified than you are.

5. How do you deal with difficult people?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

Since interpersonal relationships are a major source of employee separations, having good skills in this area are crucial to many positions. Good way to answer is to give an example. Remember a time when you had to deal with someone who was difficult...ideally, on the job but do not limit yourself to those areas alone. Explain the situation, why it was important for you to be effective and how you were able to accomplish your goals while working with someone perceived as difficult.

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The names and faces may change, but you'll always encounter difficult people. Virtually all jobs require you to work with people, and in most instances your career success depends on working effectively with people. It's important for you to give a positive and constructive answer. Points to remember include: maintaining professional behavior; keeping focused on the goals as opposed to personalities; not taking issues personally; and how you learned from your experience and have been able to apply it to other situations.

6. What area do you like most to work in?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

Do you like to work with people or things? Do you prefer a hectic pace or a steady pace? If you are primarily interested in working for a particular organization--at any level--that is perfectly acceptable to indicate in an interview. It is best to go into an interview with knowledge of the organization, the job requirements for the position(s) and a firm handle on what skills you can offer the employer.

Do a worksheet for yourself...list the areas that you are proficient in, cite an example of when/how you obtained these skills or used them, and what you like/dislike about each. See if this sheds any light on your preferences. And then consider the organization...where do you think you can add the greatest value? You are selling yourself as a problem solver.... what can you do for them? If there

are no great differences and the chances seem equal for growth, then state that you are flexible. You enjoy doing..... and cite examples of what you have done in each area. Or, go with where you have the most experience if you truly have no preference. I think making a judgment call as to where the organization has the greatest needs matched to your skills is better than..."I do not have a preference." which may come off as sounding disinterested.

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We can never over emphasize the importance of matching your qualifications to the organization that you're interviewing for. Here's another situation where you should research the organization that you're interviewing for and matching your qualifications to their needs. Your answer might include:

"My preference is to work in _____. Based on the information provided in your annual report, your strategy is to expand your efforts in _____. In my current position, I've successfully handled increasingly challenging projects in _____. I've been able to _____. I'm confident that I can contribute to your expansion efforts."

If you're early in your career, you might not know which area you'd like to work in. In this instance your answer might be: "I'm interested in gaining experience in as many areas as possible. I'm looking forward to handling a variety of assignments. At this point, I'm willing to work in any area that will broaden my experience while providing the greatest benefit to the organization."

7. How do you handle stress?

[Matt & Nan DeLuca](#)

Accept it and use it to work for you.

There are two areas that we all deal with. Those we can control and those we can't. The more we concentrate on the "controllable" factors the more we will be able to deal with those we can't. By unbundling we get to see it is not as difficult as when everything is bunched together. A great book that addresses the matter of stress in a very practical manner is "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" by Steven Covey. Give it a try. You will find it well worth your time and attention.

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Not only should you focus on what you can control, but also keep everything in perspective. Now more than ever, reflect on the positive aspects of your life – friends, family – the people and experiences that bring joy to your life.

Employers need and want employees who can maintain their focus and perspective in the dynamic work environment. Maintaining a focus on the controllable, a good sense of humor, not taking things personally, and knowing when to take a break are all valuable workplace tools to handle stress. It may be as simple as keeping photographs of your family in your office or taking a ten-minute walk. Which tools do you use?

Another option is give the interviewers an example of a stressful situation in a current or past job. As much as possible select a situation similar to what you will face in the job that you're interviewing for. Describe how you handled the stress.

8. How do you determine your priorities?

[Matt & Nan DeLuca](#)

The real question underlying this dilemma is "How do you handle priorities?" or, "How do you react to pressure?" One way to answer this is to look at the priorities of each person's request and determine which request is more crucial to the mission of the organization. Obviously, if the CEO asked you to do a favor and pick up flowers for a staff member and your immediate supervisor needs a report

ASAP because a client is waiting for the information to place a large order--you have conflicting political and profit agendas. I would make immediate efforts to meet the supervisor's request and, in between, make some quick telephone calls about floral deliveries or use an online resource.

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A general checklist for prioritizing work are legal and regulatory requirements where the consequences would include civil or criminal penalties (for example OSHA, DOT or EPA), who the work is for (the CEO versus a department head), what your supervisor/manager says, due dates and what can you complete versus doing piecemeal. Tailor the checklist for your profession. Other considerations might include life threatening situations or customer service.

9. What is your greatest strength?

[Matt & Nan DeLuca](#)

Now, this is one of those questions that you hoped they would ask. In your research into the company and into the job opening, what are the prime requirements? What are the skills, traits and/or experiences most needed? Looking into your own experiences and work history, as well as skills developed, what can you match up with what the organization most needs? What are the problems that you are looking to solve for them? What is it that you are bringing into the equation?

Do not limit yourself to those 'verbs' used in your resume (delegating, organizing, budgeting...whatever you used) but look beyond into adjectives such as calm, level-headed, passionate, enthusiastic...what words would describe you? Target your response to what is needed and what you can provide; be prepared to provide a short example or story to illustrate.

"My strength comes in my inquisitiveness...I am always wanting to look beyond the surface of the everyday transactions. This really came to be valuable in my last job. I was curious about all the different file folders being used...there seemed to be no obvious reason for the colors. So I asked. It turned out, it depended on who went to the supply room last. Based on my suggestions, we started a phasing in a color-coded system and in 6 months, it was easy to stop what work was need to be done and what files were ready to be completed. I think we saved both time and money doing things differently."

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Focus on strengths that are skills and abilities vital to the job that you are interviewing for. If the job requires strong project management skills, emphasize your project management or project management-related skills. Strengths should be reinforced by work and real life examples.

10. What is your greatest weakness?

[Matt & Nan DeLuca](#)

This is usually a chance to damn yourself with faint praise, turning what may be a weakness but is actually a strength. For example: "I cannot leave a job half-done and usually find myself thinking of possible solutions to problems while I am driving to work or in the shower. Some may think I take it too seriously, but I have found keep ideas on the 'back burner' usually saves time and effort in the long run." Another tactic is to remember a true weakness...and relate how you have overcome it. It should be a small weakness...not a major character or work-related flaw. This is not the time to go into details regarding personal problems. "I was being flooded with paper and I could not keep up until I requested we try for a paper-less department, relying on email for the bulk of our communication. This not only cleared my desk considerably, improved my work rate it also greatly improved office communications."

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Your weakness should not be the same as the essential skills and abilities for the job that you're interviewing for. For example, if the job that you're interviewing for requires strong customer service skills, don't emphasize the fact that you like working with equipment more than working with people. Weaknesses may be further addressed by what steps you've made to improve yourself and an example of your improvement. Here are a couple of examples of how you can answer this question in a more positive way:

"One area I'd like to improve in is"

"My weakness is that I demand too much of myself"

11. When is it justifiable to deviate from program policies and procedures?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

It is a good idea to have some idea of the corporate culture before an interview to have a point of reference when faced with open-ended questions like this. Some companies are very conservative---everything is by the book. Others are more open to innovation, to change.

Obviously, no employee should deviate from procedures when it would cause harm to an individual or an organization...smoking in a hazardous zone, for example or NOT reporting someone who was putting everyone at risk of a fire. Another category would be one where it would be motivated by personal gain---raising the price on something and keeping the 'extra' or giving someone a more favorable deal to gain a personal advantage. I cannot give you absolutes to this question---it really involves your personal ethics and lifestyle. Would you ever break a rule? Or only for a very good reason? What kind of reasons would allow you to transgress policy?

Think of possible scenarios that could occur on the job that might prompt you to cross the line? Has this ever happened before? Relating a response to something that is applicable to the job or organization would be helpful. Review this sample answer:

"If the situation was such that it meant keeping the customer without causing the company a loss, I might stretch the rules. In fact, this did happen to me early in my career. I was a cashier in a boutique and there was a 'no receipt, no return' policy. One customer was a regular and I remember handling a particular purchase for her. She came in a few days later claiming the item was defective but had lost the receipt. Given her record with the store, I took the initiative to give her a refund and wrote an explanation that satisfied the store manager. And, the customer continued to shop in the store."

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The question is not only about your personal ethics and lifestyle, but also about your judgment. Your answer should be within the context of the job. Policies and procedures in the intensive care unit of a hospital versus a boutique are very different. Safety and the law are areas for most jobs where there is little room for deviation. The example of the boutique from the DeLuca's is an excellent example where "the spirit of the law" as opposed to the "letter of the law" provides an opportunity to demonstrate good judgment to the benefit of the customer and the benefit of the organization.

12. What do you expect your starting salary to be?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

Discussion of salaries and compensation should not be held until an offer is about to be made. With that said, let's look into the real world when this is not the case most of the time. Employers are shopping, trying to guess your price tag. This is one of those screening questions used to either screen in or screen out so a response is important. Have you done your homework? What is the price for this job in the marketplace? Have you checked out classified ads or online ads for similar positions? Are you within the range, given your level of experience? Pegging yourself mentally to the

right price is the first step. Second step is sharing this information correctly. Do you have enough information about this new job to determine your salary? If not, state it and ask for the information that is needed. "Before I can discuss salary, I would like to know the reporting requirements and how many people I would be supervising. In addition, what are the skill levels and experience of my staff?" You can also ask "What are others in similar positions being paid?" When you can no longer stall or seek additional information..."Based on what you have told me and exclusive of other compensation elements I feel that the position would warrant a salary range of \$_____ to \$_____". Name a range such as \$40,000 to \$45,000 to give both sides some wiggle room and allow for some give-and-take when benefits and other compensation is considered. If you know what you are willing to accept as salary and what the market pays, using a salary range should permit you to be negotiable.

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Your first step is to research comparable salaries in your area. Review the classified ads and salary sites such as Salary.com. This establishes the salary range for you to negotiate from. Step two is to review the your qualifications and determine where you should fall within that range along with how you would justify your placement. Your answer would include:

"Based on my research of comparable positions, my salary range is from \$_____ to \$_____. I'm confident that given my experience in _____, _____ and _____, I warrant placement at the high end of the range."

Your answer should state the specific experiences or qualifications that meet the needs of the position. For example, if the position requires retail management experience, then not only should your refer to your retail management experience, but you should specify your profit/loss responsibility, annual revenue, marketing initiatives and number of staff.